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Editors' Introduction

Assessment in higher education has come under increasingly close scrutiny both as a focus of scholarship and polemical contestation. This, the first issue of LATHE, addresses the scholarship of assessment. For many years assessment was an unquestioned 'given' in higher education, the preserve of the few who judged the many. Its foundation on tacit knowledge added to its power and mystique. Elites reproduced themselves by promoting the very practices through which they had succeeded. Newly appointed academic staff would be introduced to opaque and arcane assessment practices — not through programmes of professional development but through the gradual (or in some cases instantaneous) grasp of the 'feel' for an appropriate grade. Students would passively receive the grade — which might be accompanied by words of praise or 'could do better'.

The articles in this issue demonstrate clearly how assessment, at the level of strategy and practice, is now being addressed through the scholarship of a wide range of staff in higher education — academics, researchers, learning technologists and educational developers.

Professor Graham Gibbs and Dr Claire Simpson discuss how assessment arrangements can promote student learning. They propose a framework of ten 'conditions under which assessment supports learning', to enable staff to assess and evaluate their own practice. Dr Scott Fleming and Dr David James investigate agreement in student assessment performance within and between modules from similar disciplines, and explore the widely-held view that grades awarded for examinations tend to be lower than those for coursework. Professor Lorraine Stefani provides a challenging perspective in discussing how to raise awareness among academic staff of the scholarship of teaching, learning and assessment, and how to support staff in developing a scholarly approach to assessment practices. Martin Jenkins considers approaches through which computer-aided assessment can provide formative feedback to enhance student learning. In the final paper, by provocatively inviting the reader to consider assessment techniques which actually prohibit student learning, Professor Sally Brown emphasises the crucial role of assessment.

The seven case studies address assessment through presentations; the use of grade descriptors for marking; aligning assessment with learning activities; self-evaluation of coursework; peer review in

scenario-based assessments; learning conversations as a framework for formative assessment; and the support of higher-order cognitive skills through self-assessment.

As the forgoing articles and case studies amply illustrate, the significance of assessment in relation to student learning undoubtedly justifies its selection as the focus of the first issue of this new journal.

Phil Gravestock and Kristine Mason O'Connor
University of Gloucestershire, UK